

The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.

Neutrality has had many roles in the past. Can it be useful again?

Historian Nicholas Tarling asks what relevance “neutrality” has in current international politics and what might it have in the future.** Even though there is no bipolar Cold War, the concept should not be lost. It may provide a substitute for the ‘tributary’ position once occupied by states that neighboured China. It might well have been a stance Ukraine could have sought in what some have described as a new Cold War.

His opening chapter defines the various concepts involved in applying the notion of neutrality to the politics of the state, and distinguishes among neutrality, neutralism and neutralisation. What relation do the concepts bear to the independence of states? How do they relate to other forms of inter-state relations and to participation in international organizations?

The concepts were applied in Asia as independent states emerged and the imperial structures of the 19th Century were displaced, but also modified. How, for example, did non-alignment differ from neutrality? Often reference was made both to the previous history of neutrality, and to recent and current examples of neutrality, in, for example, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and Austria.

Tarling goes on to deal with the concepts as they were developed in South and Southeast Asia. First he covers India, exploring the distinction between neutrality and the policy of “non-alignment” that it adopted, and its relations with China.

Burma [Myanmar] gained or regained independence in 1948. It invented a foreign policy that it was hoped would guarantee its security as a state that shared boundaries with both India and China. Both Nu and Ne Win stuck to a policy of neutrality. But striking a balance became a more difficult task when India was defeated by China in

the conflict of 1962, and the junta that succeeded Ne Win leaned towards the PRC in an unprecedented way.

The Geneva conference of 1961-2 neutralised Laos, one of the successor states to French Indo-China, but the arrangements it made did not last long, above all because of the impact on it of the conflict in neighbouring Vietnam.

The Laos agreement did, however, influence Sihanouk, the ruler of neighbouring Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s. His aim was to preserve his small country vis-à-vis neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam. In the hope that it would guarantee its independence, he was prepared to welcome the neutralisation that it had taken months of diplomacy to impose on Laos. But the US opposed a further conference, partly because of a belief that it would encourage neutralism in South Vietnam.

There the US stood firmly against those who favoured neutralism, insiders like the Buddhists as well as outsiders like de Gaulle’s France. Britain was unable to repeat the diplomatic success it had enjoyed at the Geneva conference on Laos.

The book considers the other countries in Southeast Asia, and also the novel ideas about the neutralisation of a whole region. To what extent were the creation of ASEAN and the “ASEAN Way” steps towards it?

** The full study is published in a book authored by Nicholas Tarling: *Neutrality in Southeast Asia: Concepts and Contexts*. Routledge: London and New York (2017).

